

# International research collaboration opportunities fostering EU Clean Energy transition in Bulgaria

## SUPEERA / PANTERA joint workshop

25th of May 2022, Sofia

One month after the appointment in Riga, on the 25th of May, the [SUPEERA](#) and [PANTERA](#) Projects jointly organised a second workshop in Sofia, with the aim of sharing best practices in the field of the Clean Energy Transition and fostering the engagement of non-EERA stakeholders towards EERA activities and the SET Plan.

The workshop, which took place in hybrid modality, was joined by 15 participants in presence and 23 online and it gathered experts mainly from the research sector and local organisations active in R&I activities.

### Welcome address

The Workshop was officially opened by **Valentin Kole**, Dean of the Electrical Engineering Faculty of the [Technical University of Sofia](#) who welcomed all participants and recalled the importance of these kinds of events for the university.

### First session of the workshop: existing barriers

**Ivan Matejak**, SUPEERA Coordinator, gave an overview on Bulgaria's scarce engagement in Horizon 2020 activities based on the relatively low number of signed grants, the modest attention to the SET Plan and the degree of involvement in the Implementation Working Groups. He also highlighted the root causes and structural challenges for EU13 countries in moving towards the CET, underlining the opportunities that would arise by bridging such gap.



Next, **Maryia Trifonova**, from [Sofia University](#) (SU), presented the research activities implemented by SU along with the numerous collaboration agreements with many different actors in Bulgaria and abroad. In addition to participating in Horizon 2020 and Horizon Europe proposals, the Department of Industrial Management and Economics has been working with smaller research grants and collaborates closely with policy makers and industry.

**Lilly Stammler**, Senior energy expert at [SOFENA](#) (Sofia Energy Agency), opened her speech with a map displaying the energy associations currently active in Bulgaria and the interactions among them. Next, Ms Stammler provided an overview of SOFENA's activities in collaboration with the Sofia Municipality, mainly on the topic of energy efficiency in buildings, facilitating workforce upskilling activities and addressing issues relevant to energy poverty and citizens engagement.

**Dimitar Georgiev**, from [Technical University of Varna](#), after giving an overview on the research team in the Dept. of Electric Power Systems at TU Varna, outlined a series of ongoing and past projects in the field of CET. He highlighted the strong collaboration of the university with industry stakeholders and especially ongoing research projects with renowned industry players (e.g. Siemens) in the field of power systems modelling.

**Rad Stanev**, Associate Professor at Technical University of Sofia, gave an introduction on the University's structure by presenting TU Sofia's facilities to support students' training activities in the field of power and grid management, also underlining the current R&I activities of the university in these fields and its involvement in EU funded projects.



## Panel Discussion and Q&A

The first part of the event prompted a fruitful Q&A session and panel discussion, moderated by Ivan Matejak, which allowed participants to share opinions on Bulgaria's low involvement in H2020 and other European research programs. The first question addressing the speakers aimed at investigating their views on the challenges and obstacles for Bulgaria's participation to funding schemes.



First respondent, Ass. Prof. **Maryia Trifonova** complained, on the one hand, the lack of a national strategy on CET and, on the other hand, the absence of data collection mechanisms on past proposals' success rate within the University. In addition, she lamented lack of know-how on EU funding programmes and proposal writing, submission and reporting process which, together with the low organisation at administration level, has been the main reason for the non-engagement of the University in leading roles. Nevertheless, Ms Trifonova explained that the University of Sofia has been trying to address these kinds of issues by developing ad-hoc workshops and training activities in European Project Management for Research addressing PhD students, with the general objective of creating a “*project culture*” within the Institution.

**Lilly Stammler** underlined the lack of collaboration between the municipality and the Bulgarian higher education institutions, possibly to be traced back to the absence of structured understandings and cooperation agreements between research centres and NGOs.

Finally, **Rad Stanev** underlined on the one hand TU Sofia's difficulty to reach and establish durable communication channels with Bulgarian National Contact Points and on the other the good collaboration between the Ministry of Energy and the University.

After presenting and discussing the main bottlenecks for Bulgaria's involvement in H2020 and HEU, the second part of the conversation regarded how to tackle such challenges and how to improve collaboration at EU and national level.

**Maryia Trifonova** stressed that in the last couple of years there has been a huge interest from the business to pursue collaborations with universities whereas, despite the existent dialogue with government authorities, it is hard to establish more structured collaborations with Ministries. Ms Trifonova added that the University of Sofia has been working on a strategy to create specific tools, such as assessment framework and models to ease the process of developing successful collaborations and applying for EU calls.



On the topic of improving networking with other stakeholders, **Lilly Stammler** mentioned that one of the most pressing issues concerns making the first contact with other organisations, being very hard to even have a response from them.

On the other hand, **Dimitar Georgiev** stated that TU of Varna, although being geographically distant from the capital, over the years has managed to establish a good network of collaborations in Bulgaria, in particular with TSO and DSO.

**Rad Stanev** wrapped up the Q&A session by listing the challenges for TU Sofia in participating in EU research programmes: from the disadvantage of being less experienced to the difficulty in securing the financial resources needed to generate quality proposals and from Bulgaria's limited infrastructures to the inadequate national funding dedicated to research. Nevertheless, he emphasized the importance for TU Sofia to be involved in European Initiatives such as [ETIP-SNET](#), being it an advantageous way for the University to work its way into the prolific environment of other organisations.

## Second session of the workshop: available opportunities for collaboration

The second session of the workshop focussed on existing opportunities and platforms for collaboration; it was opened by **Spyridon Pantelis**, Project Manager at EERA, who introduced the CET Partnership's structure and involved stakeholders' groups. After an overview on Horizon Europe's pillar 2, Mr Pantelis presented a selection of upcoming calls under Cluster 5 (Climate, Energy and Mobility) and the HEU Widening calls with a focus on the Hop On Facility, aiming at integrating one participant from the widening countries to an ongoing project under pillar 2.

**Berta Matas Güell**, Senior Researcher at [SINTEF](#), gave an overview on [EEA and Norway Grants](#) for the period 2014-2021, which are directed to the EU13 States. [EEA and Norway Grants](#) for the period 2014-2021, which are directed to the EU13 States. Ms Matas Güell showed the programme's structure, the eligibility criteria and concluded with examples of ongoing projects in Bulgaria under the umbrella of EEA funds.



The second session of the workshop continued with the display of two recorded presentations by **Venizelos Efthymiou**, PANTERA coordinator and Chairman of [FOSS Research Centre](#). The first presentation focused on the PANTERA Project, whose aim is to strengthen the involvement and cooperation of all EU Member States to achieve the CET through the development of R&I. The second presentation focused on the [EIRIE Platform](#), an online collaborative environment aiming at bringing all the knowledge created in Europe on smart grids and green energy under the same umbrella and make it accessible to the public.



### Panel Discussion and Q&A

The second part of the workshop triggered a meaningful discussion among participants, on new collaborations and new funding opportunities for Bulgaria.

**Dimitar Georgiev** recognized the value and advantages of EU Funding in concretizing research ideas within the university. Likewise, **Lilly Stammler** revealed SOFENA's strong interest in participating to the outlined funding opportunities once potential project topics have been identified. Nevertheless, Ms Stammler expressed concern towards the "not intuitive" application process for EU funding and for the shortage of professional figures that have the competences to complete the setting-up of the Consortium and the drafting and submission of proposals. In this regard, **Spyridon Pantelis** presented various options to be taken into account for collecting useful information and get in touch with potential future project partners: from using the funding and tenders portal, to participating in infodays organised either at a European (EC) or national level (organisations, NGOs). **Ivan Matejak** intervened in the discussion by also mentioning the crucial role of National Contact Points in providing specific information and in offering research institutions and businesses with free training on the process of proposal drafting and submission. Mr Matejak also reminded the audience of the role of EERA in creating synergies and fostering cooperation through the 18 Joint Programmes at a European level.

On this note, **Berta Matas Güell** underlined the importance of activating NCPs and draw attention on the value of matchmaking events as occasions to meet with different stakeholders that could be interested in collaboration opportunities.

**Angel Nikolaev** from [Black Sea Energy Research Centre](#) expressed its concern over the lack of infrastructure and capacity for his Association to coordinate projects and called for authorities to develop a process aimed at helping smaller organisations prepare the proposals and get in touch with other European partners. In this respect, Mr Nikolaev mentioned the role of the [Association of the Bulgarian Energy Agencies](#) in



organising annual events which are, however, mostly addressing NGOs, and not research centres, invested in the topic of CET. In this respect, **Mr Stanev**, stated that, despite this option it is not easy to find partners willing to engage in proposal writing and that it would be helpful for the research community of EU13 countries to also have a special support coming from the EC.

### **Closing remarks**

Although actively working towards achieving a low carbon economy, Bulgaria, features low participation rates in research and innovation (R&I) activities and in the realisation of the EU's SET Plan Implementation Plans. As a consequence, and unlike more successful Member States, Bulgaria has received only a marginal contribution of EU R&I Horizon 2020's budget. By organizing these kinds of events, the SUPEERA Project aims at raising awareness about the SET Plan and Clean Energy Transition among research organisations and funding bodies from EU13 countries, while encouraging their mobilization towards their implementation. All materials related to this event can be found on the [SUPEERA Website](#).